

The Buddha in the Robot

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Perhaps the closest thing I have ever experienced to enlightenment occurred to me in my freshman year of college while I was taking my Calculus final exam. You see when I was in high school; science was by far my favorite subject. Believe it or not but, I loved chemistry while almost everyone else in my class hated it. I even went to summer school once to take an extra biology class. So when I was filling out my college applications I wrote in under possible major: chemistry. However I quickly learned that high school chemistry and college chemistry are two different things. I have this recurrent dream where I am still in school but I have not done any of the homework or read any of the material and the test or paper is tomorrow. This sense of impending doom was a palpable reality for me during my first semester of college.

So when the day of reckoning came that fateful afternoon of my Calculus exam, I approached the room with an emotion not unlike what

people must have felt going before the guillotine in eighteenth century France. Well as I struggled through the exam, half of which was familiar, the other half written in Sanskrit, a thought came to me as if a revelation. That if I changed my major, then this would be the very last math test that I would ever have to take again for the rest of my life! And with that epiphany, a great weight was lifted from my psyche. I began to watch the clock, “only 45 minutes before I never have to do math in school again!” After an hour of intellectual wrestling, I turned in my exam and went to the cafeteria and ate dinner with the satisfaction that comes only to those who know exactly where they do, or don’t, belong in the grand scheme of the universe. It was that day that I learned what I was not called to do. It is a good feeling actually. It was much like the old limerick:

“There was a great student from Trinity/ who found the square root of infinity.

It gave him such fidgets to count up the digits,/ he chucked math and took up divinity.”

I asked myself, “What can I do that is the complete opposite of this?” And that is how I got into this line of work. This seems to be a common dichotomy in our culture nowadays: science and religion are hostile enemies. I won’t regal you with the grand history of this conflict from Galileo to the present. However it is interesting to note that

Unitarian Universalists have been very interested in the overlap between science and religion. Newton Mann, the minister of the First Unitarian Church of Omaha was one of the first ministers in the country to reconcile Darwinian evolution with religious ideas. He felt that these need not be enemies. Rather religion had something to learn from evolution. The Unitarian theologian Ralph Burhoe started the journal Zygon; the Journal of Science and Religion. Humanists in the twentieth century believed that science was the ultimate means of understanding the world. Some people around the turn of the last century believed that religion would eventually become obsolete. Andrew Carnegie set up foundations to promote science and philanthropy because he believed that the religion of his day was a dinosaur that needed to realize it was extinct.

Interestingly, in the last couple of the decades the new age movement has developed an interest in the connections between science and religion, or should I say spirituality. The new age movement is notoriously difficult to define, but basically there seems to be a theme within this rather expansive collection of beliefs and practices that science, particularly particle physics, has confirmed some of their religious ideas. Now I know even less about quantum physics than I do about the new age movement, so by no means do I speak with much authority in this area. After all, you know how well I did in Calculus in college! Not much room for me to go speculating on the nature of atoms

and the like. But as I understand it, some or maybe all, of these particles exhibit some interconnection between them. If you take two photons and have them interact with each other, they will affect one another. Furthermore, they will continue to affect each other even when they are far apart. Sub-atomic particles appear to share some common interconnection. How a physicist explains this precisely I do not know. However there are people who see in this an explanation for the interdependent web. Others see it as a way to explain ESP. Who knows if they are right or not? Perhaps Ken Wilbur is right and science is confirming what the mystics have told us all along.

I should note that there are UUs on both sides of this issue. There are those who believe that science, rather than religion is the worldview par excellence. The latter is humanity's intellectual dead weight. But more and more new age ideas are becoming popular among Unitarian Universalists. Maybe science can reveal to us the interdependent web of life. In either case, science and religion seem to be occupying the same turf. In one case they are hostile and in the other they are neighborly.

However, the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould had another view. He claimed that science and religion are not in competition, nor in cooperation, for the same kind of truth. They seek, and are interested in, fundamentally different things. Science is a discipline of fact. It questions our assumptions of the world and seeks to prove or disprove

them. People believed at one time, much like the young Dalai Lama, that the sun revolved around the earth. By testing this assumption one gains greater understanding about the facts of the world. And that is all. Science can either give us facts, or pretty darn good guesses. But what do these facts mean to us? How do we use them? What are their wider implications for our society or our personal lives? These questions are questions of value and meaning. Religion is interested primarily in these sorts of questions. What does it mean if we can some day clone a human being? Should we? What does it say about human nature that we now have, and could very easily, destroy countless lives with awful weapons? Or what does it say about us that we can save so many lives with medical technology?

Religion does not seek what is measurable, testable, or objective. The great Protestant theologian Karl Barth believed that religion itself was a totally other category of existence in no way related to the “natural” phenomenon that science seeks to capture. Barth may overstate things a bit but his point is well taken. Religion deals with existential truth not empirical truth. Woody Allen once asked if it were possible to see the human soul in a microscope. Perhaps, he thought, but it would have to be one of those really big ones with two eyepieces. I have had many occasions to be in conversation with UU over theology during my time as a minister. I think that theology is what ever in your life that keeps you from waking up in the middle of the night screaming

about the utter meaninglessness and absurdity of the universe. I submit to you that science will be of little help here. Well, psychiatry might, but physics and chemistry by themselves offer little solace.

While I agree with Gould's view that ultimately science and religion are two different and equally valid explorations of different dimensions of human life, I also understand human curiosity. It is not enough, particularly for us religious liberals who so highly value reason in religious living, for us to simply write, "there be dragons!" on the nautical map of religious living. Science too is predicated on an insatiable curiosity of wonder and doubt. If science and religion are doing two different things, then we must prove they are doing two different things. We must push the frontier from both the side of science looking at religion and religion looking at science. The hard part is finding someone who knows both equally. I have heard scientist claim that the science/religion discussion is often initiated by religious people and therefore has a bias toward proving the Bible with science. Whenever I have been a part of the discussion I have always been frustrated that the scientists trot out Einstein, Bohr, and Fynaman, and compare them to either Thomas Aquinas of the thirteenth century or literal fundamentalism. There are more sophisticated religious thinkers than that out there.

Perhaps at first glance Zen Master Hakuin might not be the first place to turn. And yet his famous “Song of Zazen” is probably the most poetic summation of the central religious insight in Zen Buddhism: we are already the Buddha. There is no striving for it, practicing and dying and being reincarnated and trying again in the next life. It is right here, right now. All we have to do is wake up to this very simple fact that our minds seem to want to constantly complicate. That section of the song in which he gets a little mystical and talks about, “not two not three the path is straight... with form that is no form, coming and going astray.” All that means is that the world is changing, and that is OK. Buddha-nature is not some object you discover as if you had lost your keys and suddenly found them. Rather Buddha-nature is a way of viewing and understanding our relationship to life, and this understanding is constant.

In his book, The Buddha in the Robot, Masahiro Mori reflects on science as a source of religious understanding. Mori is a professor of robotic engineering at the Japanese answer to MIT. He is also a Buddhist. In his book he talks about the work that he does building robots, thinking in new and different ways about how to mimic or improve things that you and I take for granted. His job as an engineer requires that he see the world through the eyes of one of his robots. A friend of mine in Japan actually met Mori. He was giving a lecture and one day he told his student to take out a coin. A 100-yen coin is about the size of a quarter. He told his students that their only homework for

the night was to tell him what shape the coin is. The next day all of these very bright engineering students came to class and proudly declared that the coin was a circle. “Really,” replied Mori. “Then what shape is the hole in the vending machine that you put the coin into?” A rectangle! To a robot, a coin is a rectangle just as surely as it is a circle.

Mori tells the story of eating dinner with a friend of his. In the middle of the meal, he said to his friend, “When does this piece of meat or vegetable I am about to eat become ‘me’?” Right now it is on my chopstick, but is it me when I chew it up? When it is in my esophagus? My stomach? When does the air around me, become part of me? What about the water we are drinking? Do these things cease to be themselves? He came to see that there is no clear cut dividing line between what is part of me and what is not. But at the same time, one cannot say the water I drink is exactly the same thing as me. There is difference. Water is not meat. Vegetables are not air. I may be connected to these things, yet they have their own identity. In this way the interconnections that are necessary for all of life to come into being become very real to my experience. I can understand Mori’s explanations much easier than I can the rather esoteric comparisons between someone like Nagarjuna and Werner Heisenberg.

Mori claims that these interconnections extend not only to biology, but also to the machines that he creates. His basic premise is that Robots

have Buddha-nature. Meaning that robots and machines also participate in this multi-layers web of existence with us. We are dependent upon them just as they are dependent upon us. Another example he gives is driving a car. Most if not all of us drove or rode in a car to get here this morning. Normally we understand ourselves to be driving the car. We are the one telling the machine what to do. I push on the break and I slow down, I turn the wheel to the right and the car goes right. However, Mori says, it could be that the car is driving us as much as we are driving it. A car has a particular configuration of controls; two or three pedals, a steering wheel, maybe a gear shifter. We have to conform to the car's set of rules for it to obey us. We have to press the gas in order to go faster. There is no other choice. Just as the previous example we see that the car and the human form an interdependent system. This interdependence is itself Buddha.

My friends, everyday we see on the news examples of the might of science and technology. The American military has some of the most impressive and sophisticated pieces of machinery in the world. We use everything from laser sights, to GPS bombs, and spy satellites. It is because of our high level of technology that we can even see these things in the first place. Reporters can literally film a live firefight in real time. And yet I cannot help but reflect that science is neutral in times of war. Might does not make right. Religion asks the questions about values and meaning and the reasons for why we are here. In this

regard religion has much catching up to do to reach science's level of sophistication. What are the implications of our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan for future conflicts? On our standing in the world? Is it right to protest a war in which my neighbors are sacrificing themselves? What would escalation in one war mean? What implications might it have for the next election? These are good questions about value without any clear answers. When I handed in that Calculus exam so many years ago I traded in one set of difficult problems for a whole new set.

May our religious sensitivities come to equal our technical expertise. And may we all see the Buddha in everything including the wind, the flowers, and the robots. Amen, Blessed Be.